

A
COMMUNION
of
SUBJECTS

Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics



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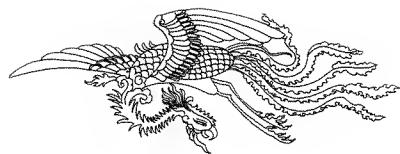
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Strategies of Vedic Subversion

The Emergence of Vegetarianism in Post-Vedic India

EDWIN BRYANT

This essay examines aspects of the history of animal slaughter in certain orthodox Hindu Sanskrit textual sources¹ by exploring the tension between the *himsā*,² “violence,” constitutional to the sacrificial requirements of the Vedic age, and the *ahimsā*, “nonviolence,” associated with the *ātman*, or soul-based sensitivities of the post-Vedic age.³ As the development between these two polarities evolved, animals increasingly began to be perceived as subjects, fellow souls temporarily encapsulated in nonhuman physical bodies, as opposed to disposable objects that could be utilized and sacrificed against their will in the pursuit of human needs. In this latter regard, the attitudes during the Vedic period were comparable to that in other sacrificial cultures of the ancient world that invoked scriptural authority for legitimacy in the matter of the slaughter and consumption of animals.

Where the Indian case study is noteworthy, and thus of particular interest to the comparative study of animals in the religious traditions of the world, is that a vegetarian ethic developed

sometime prior to the Common Era, wherein a sense of communion between humans and animals evolved. This was based on the conviction that all living beings contained an *ātman*, or innermost conscious self. These *ātmans* were all perceived as ontologically equal irrespective of the material form, human or nonhuman, within which they were temporarily encapsulated. Such communion was further enhanced by the notion of reincarnation that emerged in the late Vedic period, which held that all souls in animal forms were eventually destined to attain human forms, while souls in human forms could potentially become animals in future births, depending on the nature of their activities during their human sojourn.

Attention will be directed here to the dissonance caused by the emergence of such an ethic to orthodox sensitivities, which were reluctantly obligated to acknowledge the legitimacy of animal slaughter in the sacrificial context, since such activities are prescribed in the sacred texts of the older Vedic period. These texts are consid-

ered *apauruseya*, trans-human (i.e., divinely revealed), and their acceptance is one of the main definitional factors of orthodoxy. This dilemma caused many orthodox Brāhmaṇas, the priestly and scholarly caste, to devise strategies of subversion or reinterpretation of the ancient sacrificial injunctions, despite being constrained by the very nature of orthodoxy to stop short of explicitly rejecting Vedic authority altogether. This essay explores some of the hermeneutical methods adopted to accomplish these ends.

The Vedic period is the earliest era in South Asia for which we have written literary records, and provides the substratum from within which, or against which, all subsequent religious expressions evolve, at least in the north of the subcontinent. The prominent religious expression in this period is that of the sacrificial cult wherein items, including animals, are offered to the various gods through the medium of fire. Considerable textual detail regarding the specifics of the sacrifice exists in the vast body of material that was orally transmitted and recorded by the followers of the Vedic cult. While the Sanskritic literary tradition is voluminous, the texts containing material specific to the sacrifice include the four Vedas, much of which consist of hymns used in the sacrificial context; the prose Brāhmaṇa texts (not to be confused with the priestly caste), which contain prescriptions and details of sacrificial specifics; the Āranyakas, which are a type of bridge between the Brāhmaṇa and Upaniṣadic texts; the Upaniṣads, which are less concerned with sacrifice and more with philosophical enquiry; and the various Sūtra texts, some of which contain detailed information connected with the correct performance of sacrifice. There are also various Smṛti law books principally dealing with various rules and regulations governing various aspects of human activity, some of which also include sacrificial prescriptions. The post-Vedic period sees the emergence of the Epics such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Māhābhārata*, as well as the Purāṇas. These texts consist primarily of narrations about Hindu gods and goddesses and their

devotees, but are also vast repositories of information on sacrifice and ritual, as well as a wide variety of subject matter that has shaped what has come to be known as Hinduism, including cosmologies, the social system, royal lineages, and esoteric and normative modes of worship.

There are numerous references as early as the *Rgveda*, the oldest and most revered Vedic text, to people eating meat. They enjoyed the flesh of fat sheep,⁴ as well as that of the goat and the bull, and they relished the smell of meat.⁵ Indra, a prominent god of the early period, boasts of having been offered more than fifteen oxen,⁶ and horses, bulls, oxen, barren cows and rams were offered to Agni, the god of fire.⁷ Most of the references toward meat-eating and animal slaughter in this ancient period occur within a sacrificial context. Perhaps the most famous Vedic sacrifice is the *asvamedha*, the horse sacrifice, wherein horse flesh is cooked in a pot and offered to the fire.⁸ A dog as well as a number of other animals are also killed in the horse sacrifice.⁹ There are a number of other forms of Vedic sacrifices in addition to the *asvamedha*, such as the *rājasūya* and the *agniṣṭoma*, in all of which animals are sacrificed. The later Śrauta-sūtra texts in particular discuss many types of animal sacrifices, some of which involved the slaughter of numerous different animals.¹⁰ Although cows were *aghnyā*, "not to be killed," and despite their sacrality in later Hinduism, barren cows as well as bulls were also killed ritually.¹¹ It is noteworthy, given the prevalence of vegetarianism among this class in later times, that in many of these sacrifices the meat was distributed to the Brāhmaṇas, the priestly caste (not to be confused with the Brāhmaṇa texts by the same name).¹² The animals are not simply sacrificed, their flesh is eaten: some Brāhmaṇa texts go into considerable detail discussing which parts of the slaughtered animal's anatomy was to be apportioned to which priest.¹³

At the same time, preliminary signs of tension or unease with such slaughter are occasionally encountered even in the earlier Vedic period. As early as the *Rgveda*, sensitivity is

shown toward the slaughtered beasts; for example, one hymn notes that mantras are chanted so that the animal will not feel pain and will go to heaven when sacrificed.¹⁴ The *Sāmaveda* says: “we use no sacrificial stake, we slay no victims, we worship entirely by the repetition of sacred verses.”¹⁵ In the *Taittiriya Āranyaka*, although prescriptions for offering a cow at a funeral procession are outlined in one place, this is contradicted a little further in the same text where it is specifically advised to release the cow in this same context, rather than kill her.¹⁶ Such passages hint, perhaps, at proto-tensions with the gory brutality of sacrificial butchery, and fore-run the transition between animals as objects and animals as subjects.

The same tension becomes progressively more visible in the later Vedic period—some texts are still legitimizing violence against animals, while others are opposing it, sometimes in the same text. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* has one of the earliest statements prohibiting the consumption of meat, at least that of the bull or the cow. This text states that the gods decree that these particular animals support everything in the world, therefore eating these is like eating everything and a person so doing will be reborn as a sinful being.¹⁷ Yet, in the same breath, the verse acknowledges that Yajñavalkya, a renowned sage, eats the flesh of cows and oxen provided it is tender. The slightly later *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* is advocating that parents should eat rice cooked with beef or veal if they want a learned son who is a knower of the Vedas,¹⁸ but by the still slightly later *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, we find a clear reference to refraining from killing, *sarva bhūtāni*, ‘all living entities,’ heralding the types of attitudes that become so typical of later Hinduism.¹⁹

Some ambivalence toward animal sacrifice and meat consumption is also visible in the Dharma and *Gṛhya Sūtras*, which are prescriptive law books. There are a variety of lists in these texts outlining creatures that are fit for human consumption that parallel the ancient dietary restrictions of other old-world cultures:

from five-toed animals, only porcupine, hare, iguana, rhinoceros, and tortoise are edible. Birds that eat by scratching with their feet and are not web-footed may be eaten, as may fishes, animals killed by beasts of prey if no blemish is visible, and animals deemed fit by the wise. Animals that can be eaten include those with a double row of teeth, too much hair, without hair, or one hooved, as well as various birds and fish.²⁰ To a great extent, this genre of texts continues in the same vein as the ritualistic texts: the first food of a child should be goat or partridge meat if the parents desire boons;²¹ one desiring the harmony of minds should eat calf meat mixed with some sour substance;²² food mixed with fat satisfies the forefathers for varying periods of time—beef for a year, buffalo for longer and rhino longer again.²³ Vasiṣṭha, one of the authors of a set of Dharmasūtras, recalls that sage Agastya, during a thousand-year sacrifice, went out to hunt in order to prepare sacrificial cakes with the meat of tasty beasts and fowls.²⁴ This story is to reoccur as a source of authority in a number of other later texts condoning meat-consumption. Pāraskara, another such author, also delineates that those worthy of special reception were to be offered *arghya*, a preparation that had to contain flesh.²⁵ The author of another set of Sūtras, Āpastamba, declares that if a host feeds his guests meat, he attains merit.²⁶ In these texts, too, the cow is not exempt from slaughter: Vasiṣṭha’s Sūtras state that milk cows and oxen may be offered,²⁷ and that a host may offer hospitality to a Brāhmaṇa priest by cooking a full-grown ox.²⁸ Just as discordant from the perspective of later Hinduism, Gautama notes in his Sūtras that even a hermit may eat meat.²⁹ Nor is this even always an option: if an ascetic invited to eat at a sacrifice rejects meat he shall go to hell for as many years as the slaughtered beast has hairs.³⁰

All in all, in the Dharmasūtras and the early Vedic period in general, killing is clearly legitimated and even obligatory in certain situations, provided it is in sacrificial contexts; however, even then, injunctions against meat-eating do

begin to surface. The Baudhāyana Dharmasūtras determine that a student is to abstain from meat-eating, since this is considered a breach of appropriate conduct.³¹ For Āpastamba, a student is not to eat meat oblations even if they are offered to the forefathers.³² While stating that the slaughter at a sacrifice is not considered slaughter, Vasiṣṭha nonetheless states that meat can never be obtained without injuring living beings, and injuring living beings does not procure heavenly bliss.³³

It is toward the end of the Vedic period, in the Smṛti genre of law books, that we get a more overt sense of discomfort with the butchery surrounding the sacrificial cult, and increasing reference to the benefits of abstinence. While some texts unabashedly uphold the old ways, other texts, or even other sections of the same text, show signs of disquiet or even conflict. In the *Yajñavalkya Smṛti*, for example, it is stated that one can eat meat without incurring any guilt when one's life is in danger, when making offerings to the ancestors, when it has been sprinkled with water and *mantras* recited, or when it has been offered to the gods and forefathers.³⁴ Yet, the verses following this allowance state that one slaying beasts outside of the ritual context dwells in hell for as many days as there are hairs on the body of the beast, and one who avoids meat-eating obtains all desires, gets the fruits of the horse sacrifice and, though living at home, becomes a sage.³⁵

Nowhere is this conflict of priorities more evident than in Manu, the principal lawgiver for Hindus, and reputed author of what was to become the most authoritative legal text in Hinduism. Here again we find that killing in a sacrificial context is not considered killing,³⁶ and that birds and beasts recommended for consumption may be slain by Brāhmaṇas to feed their dependents on the grounds that Agastya and other sages did so in ancient times.³⁷ As in the older texts, Manu lists the types of creatures one can eat,³⁸ along with the creatures not to be eaten.³⁹ But Manu is much more specific about the sacrificial parameters of meat-eating: one may law-

fully eat meat only when it has been sprinkled with water, when *mantras* have been recited, when Brāhmaṇas desire one to do so, when one is performing a rite according to law, and when one's life is in danger.⁴⁰ One should not eat meat without a sacred purpose;⁴¹ meat eating is permissible only in a sacrificial setting,⁴² but within such a context, herbs, trees, cattle, birds and other animals slaughtered in sacrifice attain a higher existence in their next life along with the Brāhmaṇa priest performing the ritual.⁴³ Killing animals according to Vedic injunctions leads the sacrificer as well as the animal to the highest position.⁴⁴ In addition, if a man engaged in sacrifice refuses to take meat he becomes an animal for the next twenty births.⁴⁵

With regard to the sacrificial prerogative of meat-eating, then, Manu subscribes to the injunctions and customs of his Vedic forefathers. Where he departs from them, however, is in his drastic admonitions against meat consumption outside that context: a man who slays unlawfully, that is, outside the sacrificial context, will be slain as many times as there are hairs on the body of the animal;⁴⁶ he who increases his own flesh with the flesh of others is the greatest of sinners;⁴⁷ one who injures living beings to please himself never finds happiness either living or dead;⁴⁸ one who permits the slaughter of animals, cuts them, kills them, buys them, sells them, cooks them, or serves them is himself equal to a slayer of animals;⁴⁹ one who desires to increase one's own flesh by the flesh of others, is the worst kind of sinner;⁵⁰ one should shun meat eating because meat cannot be obtained without injuring sentient beings which is detrimental to heavenly bliss;⁵¹ one should abstain from meat eating upon considering the origin of flesh and the cruelty of fettering and slaying corporeal beings;⁵² one who has an addiction to meat should—significantly—rather make a sacrificial animal out of clarified butter or flour;⁵³ and, again—just as significantly—an abstainer of meat gets equal merit with a performer of the prestigious Vedic horse sacrifice.⁵⁴ The Vedic sacrifice is thus not rejected; instead

a nonviolent yet equally efficacious alternative is offered. It is in Manu that we find the popular etymology of the term for meat: *mām sah* "me, he" (i.e., the animal whose flesh I eat in this life will devour me in the next world;⁵⁵ see also, in this regard, *Mahābhārata, Anuśāsana Parva* 116). Manu even prescribes five sacrifices to atone for the sins incurred in the unavoidable killing of tiny entities in the five "slaughter-houses" that are a standard feature of any Hindu homestead: the grinding stone, pestle, mortar, hearth, and water vessel.

The impression one can draw from all this, I suggest, is that as a *Vaidika*, an orthodox follower of Vedic culture, Manu is obliged to defer to the sanctity of Vedic injunctions, and thereby is forced to allow the performance of animal sacrifice and the eating of meat in ritualistic contexts. But the quantity and quality of his invectives against meat-eating for the purpose of satisfying the palate suggest that were it not for such scriptural constraints, Manu would have no tolerance for the slaughter of animals. Indeed, he goes so far as to implicitly undermine normative sacrificial practices by authorizing a substitute to the sacrificial animal, one made of butter and flour, and declaring that abstinence from meat produces the same benefit as the ancient highly desired and prestigious horse sacrifice. Efficacious alternatives are thus created for the hallowed Vedic rites, and sensitivity for animals as subjects clearly emerges from such prescriptions.

The *Mahābhārata* contains some of the strongest statements against the slaughter of animals and the eating of meat. On the one hand we have the usual statements indicating that animals were eaten, at least by the Kṣatriyas, the warrior caste; the sun god, for example, promises Yudhiṣṭhira an unlimited supply of food including meat, after being worshipped by him.⁵⁶ Moreover, the sacrificial rites were still in full swing—Yudhiṣṭhira feeds ten thousand brāhmaṇas with various delicacies including the flesh of wild boars and deer,⁵⁷ and elsewhere performs an *asvamedha* horse sacrifice in which vast num-

bers of creatures were tied to the stake, slaughtered, and cooked.⁵⁸

But on the other hand the *Mahābhārata* has numerous stories and anecdotes glorifying the merits of nonviolence toward animals. For example, the story is recounted of a sage who was once impaled by some thieves on a pike. When the sage asked Dharma, the god of righteousness, what his offense had been to merit such a karmic reaction, he was informed that he had once pricked an insect with a blade of grass and was now suffering the karmic consequences, thereby underscoring the severe reaction involved in harming even an insect. Elsewhere, the sage Jājali allowed birds to nest on his head, restraining from stirring so as not to injure them. He stood in this condition even after the eggs had hatched, and, indeed, remained immobile until well after the birds had grown and flown off from the nest, awaiting their possible return. Another sage, Cyavana, while meditating under water, was hauled up by fishermen's nets along with a multitude of fishes. Seeing that great slaughter of fish surrounding him, the sage declared that he had lived with the fish for so long that he could not abandon them, and thus he should either die with them, or the fishermen should sell him along with the catch.⁵⁹

Some of the strongest admonitions against meat-eating emanate from the mouth of Bhīṣma, grandsire of the Kuru dynasty. Bhīṣma explains to Yudhiṣṭhira that compassion is the highest religious principle—indeed, three entire chapters of the Epic are dedicated to the evils of meat-eating.⁶⁰ The eating of meat is compared to eating the flesh of one's son, and those who indulge in such a diet are among the vilest of human beings, and their future lives are fraught with great misery. Howsoever it is dressed, Bhīṣma notes, meat enslaves the mind and deprives the consumer of the joys of heaven—in fact, the righteous gained entrance into heaven in previous ages by giving up their own bodies to protect the lives of other creatures.⁶¹

Yudhiṣṭhira then posits the important question as to how, given all this, Vedic sacrifices

and rites could be followed without the offering of meat to the forefathers. Although Bhiṣma nominally acknowledges that Manu had authorized the eating of meat in a sacrificial context, he reminds Yudhiṣṭhīra that one who abstains from doing so acquires the same merit as that accrued from the performance of even a horse sacrifice. Moreover, those desirous of heaven perform sacrifice with seeds instead of animals. Bhiṣma, like Manu, thus provides an efficacious means of fulfilling Vedic sacrificial imperatives without requiring the slaughter of animals and thus he, too, implicitly undermines normative sacrificial expectations.

Bhiṣma goes on to state that discarding a meat diet is the highest form of religion, and by so doing one enjoys the confidence of all creatures and is never put in danger from other beings, even if lost in the wilderness.⁶² Although flesh is the tastiest of foodstuffs, there is nothing dearer to any creature than life, and thus there is no one crueler than one who deprives creatures of their cherished life in order to increase one's own flesh at their expense.⁶³ One suffers similar torment oneself in various future births, where one is oneself eaten by the very animals one has eaten—one will have to suffer the exact same violence oneself in a future life, as one inflicts on other creatures in this life.⁶⁴ One who abstains from meat-eating, or recites the merits of such abstinence, attains all types of boons in life followed by heaven in the next; such a person never sees hell, even if wicked in other respects. In contrast, one who shortens the lifespan of other creatures sees one's own lifespan shortened, and is persecuted in turn as a beast of prey, and finishes up tormented in hell. Bhiṣma, echoing Manu, also notes that all those involved in the arrangements for meat consumption—the buyer, seller, and cook—are no different from meat-eaters.⁶⁵

Despite all this, Bhiṣma is still forced to concede that animals killed in sacrifice can be eaten even though he immediately adds that any other type of meat-consumption is the way of the demon.⁶⁶ However, we begin to see state-

ments in the *Māhābhārata* that explicitly encroach upon the inviolability of animal slaughter even in sacrificial contexts. These statements thus go further than just providing a nonviolent but equally efficacious alternative to ritualistic slaughter, as Manu does. The Brāhmaṇa Satya, for example, is described as loosing the merit he had accrued because he had engaged in violence at sacrifices.⁶⁷ The text also informs us that in the *satya yuga*, the golden age, animals were not killed in sacrifice. Animal slaughter was introduced in *treta yuga*, the second of the four ages, when people first began to resort to violence, and it continued thereafter. The implication here is that the slaughter of animals in sacrifice was the later development of an age that was less pure, enlightened, and compassionate. Here we see the beginning of a rewriting of the old Vedic script concerning the legitimacy of sacrifice. The Vedic prescriptions condoning and promoting animal sacrifice are not ostensibly rejected, but they are demoted to a later, more degraded period of human history when human virtue had declined. The time is ripe for more radical revisionistic exegesis of the Vedic injunctions.

A similar ambivalent and conflicted situation prevails in the Purānic texts. In places, meat-eating and animal sacrifice are encouraged, in others they are fiercely discouraged. On the one hand, in the *Brāhmaṇavaivarta Purāṇa*, Śiva relates to Parvatī in a laudatory tone the story about the charity of king Suyajña who used to feed millions of brāhmaṇas with meat.⁶⁸ Likewise, the Padma and the Viṣṇu Purāṇas, primary texts for the strictly vegetarian Vaiṣṇava sects, relate the story of how the demons were bewildered into desisting from the Vedic rites and the sacrifice of animals, as a result of which the gods were able to regain control of heaven.⁶⁹ Thus, desistance from animal sacrifice is portrayed in a negative light, suggesting that the sacrifice of animals continued to be an expected mode of religion in the Purānic age; indeed, the *asvamedha* sacrifice, among others, is frequently mentioned in many Purāṇas.⁷⁰

Yet, many of these same Purāṇas are also conflicted about violence against animals, despite following the pattern of being constrained by Vedic imperative to nominally accept it in sacrificial contexts. As we have seen elsewhere, tension with the sacrificial cult is evidenced within the pages of the same text: the *Kūrma Purāṇa* requires that the performer of śrāddha, rites to departed ancestors, is to feed Brāhmaṇas with rice and meat of various kinds prepared with the appropriate rituals,⁷¹ and proclaims that any higher caste person not eating flesh at such sacrifices becomes like an animal for twenty-one births.⁷² And yet, the same *Kūrma Purāṇa* states that Brahmā created the institution of sacrifice *without* the slaughter of animals.⁷³

Like the *Mahābhārata*, in the *Skandha Purāṇa*, too, we find a revisionism of the discourse of sacrifice. We are informed that the sages were dismayed to see the violence of the sacrifice, which they stated to be against the *dharma*, religious duty, of the gods. They claimed that meat had never been eaten by the *sāttvic*, more enlightened, gods and that sacrifice is only supposed to be performed with grain or milk. When King Vasu, infamous as a sacrificer of animals, was asked by the sages whether animals or herbs were to be offered in the rites, he fell from heaven to earth for indicating the former.⁷⁴ Importantly, the *Skandha* also gives its own alternative version of the origin of Vedic sacrifice. Once, due to a Brāhmaṇa's curse, the three worlds were afflicted by famine. The common people slaughtered animals to satisfy their hunger, but the sages did not, even though dying of starvation. The sages told the people that they could sacrifice animals if their intention was to offer them to the gods rather than killing them for themselves. Consequently, gods, kings, and nonroyal mortals performed animal sacrifices and ate the meat as sanctified remnant, but, the texts hasten to add, the true *bhaktas*, devotees of God, did not indulge in such meat eating, even though they, too, were afflicted by the calamity.⁷⁵ In this narrative, the ancient Vedic sacrificial cult is presented as being a concession to

humanity on account of the specific exigencies of an emergency situation (but was nevertheless one that was not availed of by the saintly).

Along similar lines, in the *Matsya Purāṇa*, there is a dialogue on the eve of a sacrifice among sages who disapprove of the violence of sacrifices, preferring to prescribe rites involving the oblations of fruits and vegetables instead of animals.⁷⁶ As we have seen with Manu and the *Mahābhārata*, the Vedic sacrificial format is thus preserved, but the ingredients of the rites are adjusted so as to exclude slaughter. Elsewhere, the *Matsya Purāṇa* negotiates with the Vedic heritage in another way, namely, by stating that the demerit incurred by killing at sacrifices is heavier than any merit accrued therefrom.⁷⁷ Here, the boons of animal sacrifice promised by the Vedic texts are acknowledged, but they are outweighed by the negative karma incurred by such activities.

The text that perhaps goes farthest in distancing itself from the sacrificial cult is the most important Purāṇic text, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. In this text, a person understanding the essence of *dharma* does not eat meat at sacred rites, for there is no satisfaction in the slaughter of animals; indeed, refraining from harming all living beings in thought, word, or deed is promoted as the highest *dharma*.⁷⁸ Even here, the text does begrudgingly acknowledge that for special rites, although not for routine ones, a king may kill just the required number of animals and no more,⁷⁹ and one with a penchant for meat may eat the remnants of animals offered in sacrifice — although the text hastens to add that such activity is by no means obligatory.⁸⁰ But, elsewhere, the *Bhāgavata* makes a point of relating the story of Prācīnabarhiś who wantonly killed many animals in hunting and in sacrifices, and who was given a vision of these same animals waiting for his death so that they could inflict corresponding violence on him by cutting him with steel-like horns as his just karmic reaction.⁸¹

The text warns that the sin of slaying creatures cannot be removed by performing sham sacrifice just as mud cannot be cleansed by mud.

and a wine-drinker cannot be purified by wine. Moreover, those who kill animals at sham sacrifices are hypocrites and fall into hell where they are tortured.⁸² The way this text deals with animal slaughter is to graphically present the horrific reactions that accrue from its performance — a man cooking animals and birds is merciless and goes to *kumbhipāka* hell where he in turn is fried in boiling oil; unlawful animal killers are made the target of the arrows of the servants of Yama, the lord of death; those killing animals in sham sacrifices are themselves cut to pieces in *viśasana* hell; those harming insects and other lesser creatures go to the *andhakūpa* hell where, deprived of sleep and unable to rest anywhere, they are tortured by those very creatures.⁸³ In this way, while the boons promised by the old sacrificial texts are not denied, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* supplies the fine print of the Vedic contract—violence performed in the pretext of sacrifice produces temporary benefits, but at a horrible price.

I suggest that such tension in these post-Vedic texts can be understood in at least two ways. They could represent conflicting statements surfacing in synchronic chronological time, with different pro and con statements emanating from the individual sensitivities and inclinations of different authors juxtaposed together in the same text. Or, they could more likely reflect the passage of diachronic chronological time, with later redactions of the same texts adding invectives against meat-eating and sacrificial slaughter at a time when the sacrificial cult had already faded in appeal and authority, while simultaneously preserving older sections from earlier redactions which acknowledged or even encouraged such practices. Either way, what we seem to find in ancient India—which is perhaps unique amongst the sacrificial cultures of the old world in this regard—is the development of significant discomfort with the heritage of a divinely ordained sacrificial matrix that was heavily involved in the slaughter of nonhuman animals. Prompting this was the idea in the later Vedic period of a communion of

humans and animals as fellow beings embodying the same *ātman*, life force. Consequently, what was to become a prominent vegetarian ethic emerged as animals underwent a transformation in human perspectives from expendable objects of consumption to conscious subjects of experience. Many innovative thinkers involved in this development jettisoned the Vedic sacrificial rituals and their sources of authority, the Vedic texts, altogether. Some of them eventually became known as Jains and Buddhists. These communities retained no compunction toward Vedic authority, but could scorn the whole sacrificial culture along with the texts which sanctioned it and preach an unencumbered *ahimsā*, nonviolence, without the ambivalence or tension that was the lot of those remaining in the orthodox Brāhmaṇa fold.

In contrast to those who took the heterodox route, Vedic authority remained a straitjacket, compelling many orthodox Purāṇic compilers to condone or at least acknowledge sacrificial slaughter on some level or other, at least nominally. By definition, orthodoxy entails accepting the divine revelatory nature of the Vedic texts and, by extension, their injunctions. In other words, such authors were stuck with a divinely ordained sacrificial culture with all that this involved in terms of the slaughter of animals. But they nonetheless simultaneously managed to marshal all manner of ingenious arguments against animal slaughter short of jettisoning the whole sacrificial culture and, by extension, the authority of the textual sources that condoned it.

They attempted to accomplish this by rewriting the Vedic sacrificial script in a number of different ways. They argued that even though animal sacrifice is permissible—and only permissible—within the confines of the ritualistic context, only the lower gods eat meat; or only nondevotional men engage in sacrifice; or such sacrifice is the perverted development of a post-golden age; or it is the allowance of an emergency situation of famine; or fruits, seeds, or other such ingredients should be substituted for

the animals; or sacrifice accrues ghastly karmic results that far outweigh any benefits gained. In short, the authors of seminal Hindu texts began to promote the view of an enlightened individual as one partaking in a communion of ultimate equality and nonviolence between all creatures (but see Lance Nelson's essay preceding this one in this volume for a problematization of this ideal). They envisioned a universe where, at least in theory, all beings were accepted as living subjects with the same rights to life as their human companions, rather than less-animate and thus disposable objects fit for sacrifice or human consumption.

That these authors were successful in their exegetical revisionism vis-à-vis the scriptural injunctions of the Vedic matrix is evidenced by the prevalence of vegetarianism among the Hindu

upper castes⁸⁴ and among lower castes aspiring for upward mobility. They succeeded in undermining and reinterpreting the sacrificial texts in numerous ways without explicitly and overtly rejecting them, and, like their contemporary Jains and Buddhists, they strongly advocated the importance of nonviolence against what they perceived as fellow beings temporally encapsulated in the bodies of nonhuman animals. As such, the strategies they adopted, or, perhaps more importantly, their very willingness to contextualize and assign new meanings to the old injunctions from the perspective of these emerging sensitivities of communion and shared subjectivity, exemplify hermeneutical and attitudinal possibilities for other scriptural traditions of the world that have similarly legitimized the slaughter of animals in their ancient periods.

NOTES

1. This article will not consider the philosophical literature, since the rational response to traditional Vedic sacrifice as represented in certain philosophical texts has been covered by Jan Houben, "To Kill or Not to Kill the Sacrificial Animal (Yajna Pasu)" in J. Houben and K. Van Kooij, eds., *Violence Denied* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). Other related articles on the subject of non-violence against animals include Koshelya Walli, *The Conception of Ahimsā in Indian Thought* (Varanasi: Bharata Manisha, 1974), and Unto Tähtinen, *Ahimsā: Non-Violence in Indian Tradition* (London: Rider, 1976).

2. *Hims* is the desiderative verbal form of *han*, to kill.

3. I will restrict my focus to verses explicitly referring to violence against animals in specific, as opposed to the much larger range of references to *ahimsā* in general.

4. *Rgveda* 10.27.17.

5. *Rgveda* 1.162.12.

6. *Rgveda* 10.86.14 (see also, 10.27.2).

7. *Rgveda* 10.91.14.

8. *Rgveda* 1.162.13–19.

9. *Śukla Yajurveda Adhyāya* 24.

10. E.g., *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 14.5.1; *Āśvalāyan* 3.7.

11. *Rgveda* 10.91.14; 10.27.2.

12. E.g., *Atharvaveda* 9.5.

13. See K. S. Macdonald, *The Brahmanas of the Vedas* (Delhi: Bharatiya Corp, 1979, reprint), chapter VI for discussion.

14. *Rgveda* 1.162.21.

15. *Sāmaveda* 1.176.

16. *Tattiriya Āranyaka* 6.1.2.

17. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.1.2.21.

18. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.4.18.

19. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.15; the verse qualifies that there is an exception to this injunction, namely, "at holy places."

20. *Gautama Dharmasūtra* 17.27–38. Vasiṣṭha sanctions the same five animals mentioned above but lists hedgehog instead of rhinoceros. He further elaborates that animals having teeth in one jaw except camels can be eaten. All aquatics are acceptable except crocodile, porpoise, alligator, and crab; he is also more specific about the types of birds that eat

by scratching—these are five in number, two types of partridge, the blue-rock pigeon, the crane, and the peacock (*Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* 14.39–48; see, also *Baudhāyana Dharmasāstra* 1.6.13).

21. *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra* 1.16.1–3.
22. *Atharvavedīya Kausīka Gṛhya Sūtras* 12.8.
23. *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* 2.7.16.24–28; 2.7.17.1–3.
24. *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasāstra* 4.8.
25. *Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra* 1.3.29.
26. *Āpastamba Dharmasāstra* 2.3.7.4.
27. *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasāstra*, 14.46–47. He notes, however, that there are conflicting statements about rhinos and wild boar.
28. *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasāstra* 4.8.
29. *Gautama Dharmasūtra* 3.30 (Hardatta, a commentator, understands “even” to indicate in emergency situations).
30. *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasāstra* 11.34.
31. *Baudhāyana Dharmasāstra* 3.4.1–2.
32. *Āpastamba Dharmasāstra* 2.2.5.16.
33. *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasāstra* 4.7.
34. *Yajñavalkya Smṛti* 7.179.
35. *Yajñavalkya Smṛti* 7.181.
36. *Manu* 5.39.
37. *Manu* 5.22–23.
38. *Manu* 5.15–16.
39. *Manu* 5.11.
40. *Manu* 5.27.
41. *Manu* 5.34.
42. *Manu* 5.31; 5.36.
43. *Manu* 5.42; *Viṣṇu Smṛti* 51.60.
44. *Manu* 5.42.
45. *Manu* 5.35.
46. *Manu* 5.38.
47. *Manu* 5.52.
48. *Manu* 5.45.
49. *Manu* 5.51.

50. *Manu* 5.52.
51. *Manu* 5.48.
52. *Manu* 5.47–49.
53. *Manu* 5.38.
54. *Manu* 5.53.
55. *Manu* 5.55.
56. *Vana Parva* 3.52–54.
57. *Sabha Parva* 4.1–2.
58. *Āśvamedha Parva* 85; 89.
59. *Āśvamedha Parva* 50.
60. *Āśvamedha Parva* 114–116.
61. *Āśvamedha Parva* 114.
62. *Āśvamedha Parva* 115; 116.
63. *Āśvamedha Parva* 116.
64. *Āśvamedha Parva* 116.
65. *Āśvamedha Parva* 115.
66. *Āśvamedha Parva* 116.
67. *Śāntiparva* Parva 272.
68. *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, *Prakṛti Khaṇḍa* 50.14–16 (reference from K. Walli, 1974).
69. *Padma Purāṇa*, *Sṛṣṭikhaṇḍa* 13.
70. E.g., *Agni* 14.27.
71. *Kūrma Purāṇa* 22.54.
72. *Kūrma Purāṇa* 2.22.75.
73. *Kūrma Purāṇa* 1.29.42.
74. *Skandha Purāṇa* 2.9.6.
75. *Skandha Purāṇa* 2.9.9.
76. *Matsya Purāṇa* 143.30–32.
77. *Matsya Purāṇa* 142.12.
78. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 7.15.7–8.
79. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 4.26.6.
80. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.21.29.
81. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 4.25.7–8.
82. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.26.25.
83. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 5.26.13–25.
84. The Kṣatriya, warrior caste, is an important exception to this but a discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.